

The Fourth Church Pulpit

IF YOU BUILD IT, HE WILL COME

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH



A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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RECOGNITION OF WORKERS

This is a moment we have been looking forward to for a long time, the opportunity to recognize and publicly thank all the workers whose labor produced this beautifully restored space.

Now that we have you all dressed up and sitting in our pews, what we want to know is who put the hard hat and dust mask on the angel?

It has been a great experience for us, the people and staff of this congregation, to witness the restoration of our worship space. The experience was enhanced by the fact that we saw the work progress weekly, as we gathered here to worship.

Difficult to imagine this morning, but we will not forget the jungle of scaffolding, preaching through the cross bars; the folding chairs — put carefully in place, row upon row, exactly spaced, about 1,000 of them, every Saturday afternoon, and then taken down on Sunday afternoon; the fluorescent lights attached to the scaffolding; the sound system with speakers strapped to each pillar; the electronic organ and choir in the north balcony; the enormous plastic drapes covering the chancel and balconies which occasionally moved eerily during the sermon, looking a little like the movement of the Spirit, some would say an unusual phenomena in a Presbyterian sanctuary.

Some of us were almost daily visitors and came to feel even closer to the project: and each of us came to a new level of respect and gratitude for your skill, your devotion.

There were moments I do not want to forget:

- conversations with artisans and workers, trips to the top of the scaffolding, to watch the installation of the oak ceiling panels,
- the dramatic hot summer day, at the height of the grout and mortar removal when the dust was so thick in here it poured out the Michigan Avenue doors and I could see it from three blocks away.

It was on a day like that, that Micah Marty took a picture of the scaffolding and the dust, looking like something out of *Dante's Inferno* and someone sent it to Dr. Elam Davies, my predecessor who served here from 1961 to 1984, and who, with Grace, had just moved to Pennsylvania. The note said:

"Dear Elam,

Things are not the same around here since you left."

This has been an interesting and valuable chapter in the life of this congregation, quite unlike anything we have experienced before.

Part of what we have learned is that men and women do good work, are committed to their particular skills. We have learned again about vocation, that the work we do — architects, carpenters, masons, glass workers, electricians, musicians, business people, preachers, housemen — all of it is important in God's economy, that working hard and well is part of what God calls us to do during our life time.

Quaker theologian Elton Trueblood, who died a few weeks ago, said once in a book about vocation, that your work is all you really own and all you have to give away.

We have learned that this was more than a job for you: that you took it seriously...

Some of you know that one of the original workmen, back in 1913 or 1914, left his mark, signed his name in a place no one has ever seen before — or will again for a very long time. It is at the very peak of the roof, at the east end of the building, on the top of the first joist down from the ceiling, at an angle visible only from the very top of the roof looking down. He signed his name. And, of course, we know that apparently another worker came along and saw what he had done and expressed what he thought about Karl by writing one of the popular epithets of the day ... a term which has survived nicely these 80 years and means much the same today as it did then, but which is not appropriate for pulpit speech.

But he signed his work. You have, too — signed this work of art with your love and dedication and we are very grateful to you.

We are grateful for your presence today. We hope you will join us at the Park Hyatt immediately after the service for a reception and an opportunity for us to thank you personally.

And we would like you to stand now and be recognized ...

IF YOU BUILD IT, HE WILL COME

The first phase of our project has been completed, successfully and beautifully. Two-thirds of the project is still underway. In fact, it is hard to imagine that the general mess will, in six months or so, evolve into a new church building. The Garth looks like a bomb crater. Yes, the fountain is still there and yes it will function once again in the middle of a lovely, green and quiet space adjacent to Michigan Avenue. You can see the foundation of the loggia, the walkway with an entrance on Michigan Avenue, which will lead all the way through the center of the building into Westminster House's new spacious central lobby. And you can see in the parking lot the foundation for a Chestnut Street entrance and lobby with elevators and a north/south connecting spine which will skirt the handsome new Great Hall where we will gather for receptions and coffees and meetings and performances.

And at the most west and north location, on Delaware Place, you can see a new Blair Chapel, with high cathedral ceiling and stained glass taking beautiful shape.

We are engaged in the most ambitious project this church has ever endeavored since its original building enterprise.

It is expensive. We are working with expensive materials, rebuilding a 21st century church from the inside out while preserving Ralph Adams Cram's and Howard Van Doren Shaw's distinguished and priceless exterior. The project cost is \$12 million plus.

I was interested to read a *New York Times* account recently of the travails experienced by the Church of England as it struggles to maintain and restore its magnificent cathedrals; St. Paul's in London charges £3.00 (\$4.50) to visit. The Cathedral at Salisbury, one of the most dramatic and famous cathedrals, visible for miles away towering over the town and plains of Salisbury, struck a unique deal with McDonald's to finance its restoration. For \$2.00 you could see the cathedral and receive a coupon good for a Big Mac. Interesting possibilities with, say, our new neighbor, Cafe Gordon — no Big Macs here!

We have had a very successful Capital Campaign — directed first by Sally Parnell and now our new Director of Development, Tobie Smith. And we have managed to pay our bills and raise our budget modestly for next year.

But we will need the continuing support of our members and friends in the years ahead to complete the task. I invite you all to participate in this great enterprise. If you have not pledged, I encourage you to consider seriously a pledge, which can be extended over five years, or be a one-time gift, to the Capital Funds Campaign.

SERMON

The scripture lesson this morning comes from the account of a monumental building project, the construction of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem in the ninth century.

Scripture: I Kings 6:1, 11-13 (NRSV)

"In the four hundred eightieth year after the Israelites came out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv, which is the second month, he began to build the house of the Lord. ...

"Now the word of the Lord came to Solomon, 'Concerning this house that you are building, if you will walk in my statutes, obey my ordinances, and keep all my commandments by walking in them, then I will establish my promise with you, which I made to your father David. I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will not forsake my people Israel.'"

On the first page of Ray Kinsella's wonderful novel, *Shoeless Joe*, the author, narrating the story, describes a day ...

"Three years ago at dusk on a spring evening, when the sky was a robin's egg blue and the wind as soft as a day-old chick, I was sitting on the veranda of my farm house in Eastern Iowa, when a voice very clearly said to me, 'if you build it, he will come.'"

"It," of course, is a baseball field, the *Field of Dreams* Ray builds in the middle of an Iowa cornfield. And "he," of course, is Shoeless Joe Jackson, one of the greatest players in the history of the game, the star of the 1919 Chicago White Sox, forever remembered as the Black Sox for throwing the World Series to the Cincinnati Reds. Purists still argue whether or not he, — "Say It Ain't So, Joe" — actually did anything wrong. The record says he hit .375 — 12 hits in that series, but he was suspended forever, nevertheless.

I'm not sure how that got into this sermon, except that Ray builds the field and Joe Jackson comes, but so does the rest of the team, and finally Kinsella's own father, to play catch with him, a scene so sweet and heart-rendering that every man or woman in the theater who ever threw a baseball to his/her father sat and sniffed and wiped tears.

"If you build it, he will come," every preacher even remotely connected to a building project has wanted to use that line — and my time is finally here.

Kinsella understands, among many other things, the mystical relationship between our aspirations, our memories, our faith — and the buildings we build. He's right, of course. You can reconstruct in your mind the house in which you grew up, each room, each piece of furniture. You have carefully stored away your grandparents' house, the school you first attended. You can reconstruct in detail your high school, your sweetheart's front porch, your fraternity/sorority house, your dorm room. And you have stored deeply in both your memory but also in that place for hope and faith and aspiration — a variety of church buildings, perhaps the church where you sat in a pew as a child and first heard about Jesus, where you were confirmed or recited a poem, sang a solo on Children's Day, where you were married, where your parent's funeral was held, your child baptized.

There is, in fact, a very interesting building perspective and theme in the Bible. One of the major dynamics going on in the background of the story of Jesus is the restoration of the Jerusalem Temple — Solomon's Temple — by Herod the Great. It was a very controversial project. Jesus enraged the religious leaders by predicting the destruction of the Temple, even as they were working very hard to rebuild it.

In fact the building theme goes all the way back to the beginning of the story. At first there was no building, no Temple. There was no place for it. God's people were wandering tribes, on a four decade sojourn in the wilderness. During that time, Israel's infancy, the formative years, God's presence was marked by the people by the way of tent — called a Tabernacle. When the people moved, the Tabernacle was taken down, packed up and moved.

The symbolism is rudimentary and very important. God dwells with the people where they are. God travels with the people. God is not settled in one sacred place, but makes the world sacred to a single building.

But then the wandering in the wilderness ends and Israel settles the land and starts to act like a nation, with boundaries and cities and laws. The Tabernacle seems inappropriate. First, David decides to build a house for God but never gets around to it. His son, Solomon, Israel's second King, decides to complete his father's intent.

Solomon makes no small plans ... sends to neighboring nations for architects and materials, presses thousands of his subjects into forced labor, builds a copper refinery that is an engineering marvel. It takes seven years to complete it. You're never quite sure whether the building honors God or Solomon.

Walter Brueggemann says Solomon's Temple is a self-serving achievement with its sole purpose the self-securing of the King himself and his dynasty. Solomon, Brueggemann says, thinks he put "God on call" when he built that elaborate Temple.

I love the account we read this morning. The building project is underway. Apparently there is no turning back. God's going to get a house whether God wants one or not. I love the odd ambiguity, the restrained understatement: "Concerning this house that you are building, if you will walk in my statutes I will establish my promise."

It's almost a *non sequitur* — "about this house" ... and then the next part isn't about the house at all, it's about faithfulness — about how people live out their commitment to this God for whom the house is ostensibly being built.

God doesn't need that Temple. God doesn't need buildings, doesn't dwell in buildings.

In a wonderful art book on *American Churches*, Roger Kennedy, former Director of the Museum of American History at the Smithsonian, says,

"God is the mystery behind all mysteries. How foolish to think that any one form of building could be appropriate to all God's aspects."

Why have church buildings at all? Kennedy responds — because among our needs is

"to seek the mystery and to associate with others in that search." [p. 19]

Church buildings, whatever else they are, grand or simple, are eloquent declarations of a truth about us, namely that we are fully human to the degree that we acknowledge the existence of and our obligation to God, our search for the mystery.

Every church is an eloquent affirmation that the world itself desperately needs the reminder that we live in the context of eternity.

This church is eloquent testimony, sitting here, dwarfed by enormous and powerful neighbors, to the truth of God and God's kingdom on earth.

This restored building is one of the most eloquent statements of faith we could make and it is also our legacy, to our children, to those who will come after us, who will sit in these pews, underneath this ceiling and listen and sing and pray, in the years and decades ahead.

"If you build it, he will come."

What we do here, or wherever we establish our mainline churches and love, is important ... God came in Jesus Christ. God comes — when people aspire together to be faithful. God acts in the world where people join their love and hope and commitment and faith — to do God's work.

God is not confined to anyone's building. But churches, what they do and say about God, God's justice, God's compassion, are the way God continues to come into the world. And the lives of individuals who build churches and maintain them and love them bear eloquent testimony never to abandon the world, to be present in the life of the world, now and forever to God's presence in the world, and God's promise to love the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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Lord of the Church in every age, we thank you for this church: for those who build it and love and express their hope and faith through it. Lord of the Church, we thank you for churches everywhere and ask your blessing on all your people, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.